

The Military Chaplain in
Grief Situations

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Introduction.

There are few significant events in life which happen to one person alone and not to another. Whether privileges, rights, misfortunes or deprivations, men share in certain common experiences. Moral fibre and mental stability prepare us for much of the good and the bad. However, we are often unable to cope with the most universal situations.

Some of the most serious problems are those concerned with dying and grieving. In these times of grief help from other people is tremendously important; but the bereaved will also look beyond the help of men. They will seek the divine. Clergymen represent God, so God's representative is called.

God's man is privileged. Meeting the needs of the mourning is certainly one of the major areas of the minister's concern. Yet, in this important work, so often the servant of God stands in want. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the situations of grief as they apply to the dying and to those who must go on living.

The community, in which the military chaplain serves, is a society not unlike civilian societies. When grief overtakes the civilian, he in some way has the cushion of helpful loved ones, well-wishing neighbors, the home neighborhood, and religious congregations. In the military, however, this softening aspect of the home is missing. The sharp shock of grief often leaves the serviceman and his dependent in more straitened circumstances.

The serviceman often faces harsh, quick death, or death may come

by installments. The manner of death may affect the strength of the grief.

Today, most young people know little about death first hand. A generation or two ago death was not uncommon in a large family. Hospital facilities were limited and resources often prohibited hospitalization. Birth and death were part of home life. Now we are sheltered from these by expanded and more accessible hospital facilities. Babies are now born and the ill now die among professional people. This sheltering often misleads us and tends to create a false attitude toward death that is anxiety-creating. We feel that death is some vague thing which only happens to other people.--people in hospitals across our land. The military is composed of a majority of young adults who belong to this recent generation. Few of them have seen the face of the ill change day by day til death has claimed its prey. Few of them have watched their loved ones drift from health to the gray, emaciation of cancerous death. So when they are suddenly overtaken by death, their emotions are scarcely ready to accept the experience.

1. The Military Chaplain Bears the Death Message.

To be effective in ministering to others, the chaplain must be involved in the grief, yet he must learn to deal with his own feelings as he would help others deal with theirs. While sharing their grief, he must maintain an objectiveness to it. In proper balance of these circumstances, the chaplain will render his greatest service.

A. To the serviceman.

One of the most difficult situations of the chaplain is his task of bearing the message of death to the serviceman. The message received in form of a telegram must be delivered. The chaplain is often the most logical person to deliver the sad news. Knowing the person to whom the message must be given is extremely valuable. This is not always possible, however, and whether friend or stranger, the contact must be made. No one can tell the chaplain exactly what to say. The kindest way may be a direct relation of the news or it may be a preparation for the message is necessary. Tact and understanding are paramount.

The serviceman may need help in accepting the reality of the loss. The chaplain may urge the bereaved to talk about the circumstances surrounding the death. Also, the sorrowing may be helped by recalling the highlights of the life of the departed. He may soon accept the death, or he may never accept it.

The chaplain can aid the serviceman in other ways, too. These will normally include contacting members of the family at home. It will also involve preparations for an emergency leave to allow the serviceman to make his heart-sick journey home.

B. To the parent.

A second quite opposite situation often confronts the chaplain. He may be required to call upon parents and minister unto them when a serviceman-son has died. The unreality of such a situation is most difficult for parents. That which they expected least and hoped for last, has occurred. To be a link in such sad news will beget varied results. The chaplain may be despised in his representing the military, or greatly revered as a benison amid sorrow. He can be "a very present help in trouble".¹

Parents will have many questions about how the death occurred. They will want to know of their responsibility and the responsibility of the particular service regarding the physical aspects of the funeral and later administrative details.

Parents will harbor certain resentments against any cause which has deprived them of their son. The chaplain ought to make the opportunity for them to express their feelings. Once they have talked their feelings out, they will be more ready to be aided emotionally to reconstruct their attitudes and ideas about their loss.

C. To the young parents.

The serviceman may be a young father, who with his wife, has become a proud and happy parent. The birth of a child is the crowning of their marriage and their love. The death of that child may shatter their living. Here the chaplain enters their lives at a time when they must

1. Psalm 46:1

look beyond themselves. The relationship established among the couple, the chaplain and the hand of God can have lasting results for good or for ill.

D. To the widow.

Degrees of grief are not arbitrarily fixed, but among the most difficult situations is the message of sorrow delivered to the serviceman's wife. Military life is not the safest. Its hazards are many; yet, no wife prepares herself for the news of the death of her husband. The whole foundation of a family is shaken. Plans for today and hopes for tomorrow shatter. The loss of husband and father of children is catastrophic. To bear the news is to wring the heart, and yet the chaplain must be willing and ready to accept this responsibility. What he does or fails to do at this visit will be long remembered.

The bearing of the message of death is no easy task. Understanding, empathy and direction seasoned with tact and responsibility will enable God's representative to the bereaved to be effective.

The chaplain needs to give courage to the bereaved, so they may go on. He will want to arrange for someone to be with the sorrowing. He needs to instill within them the fact that God will never leave them.

II. The Military Chaplain Ministers to the Bereaved.

As the chaplain ministers to the bereaved, he becomes more than another person. He becomes a symbol of the forces of society that express concern and help. The primary feelings in grief are so universal that the chaplain can express empathy with all persons. He need not feel strangeness in such situations if the persons are strangers. Their needs are the same as those of friends in bereavement. So whenever the sorrowing is met, there the minister in the military uniform must represent faith in God. He serves in relating the grieving to the God of love, mercy and understanding.

A. Aiding in acceptance of the reality of death.

"It didn't happen!", "I can't believe it!" are only two of the many responses of the sorrowful. The loss is not at once accepted. At one moment life and all its meaning existed with a particular person playing a major part in life. Now, only a moment later, a person is informed that he must believe something entirely different. The bereaved will try to act as if the deceased is still alive. Decisions will still be predicated on what this loved one would have said, done or wanted.

The chaplain will serve well in attempting to aid the bereaved to face the reality and accept the loss. A formidable barrier prohibits the easy acceptance of such heart break. Indeed some people never accept the fact of death,--the decease of a loved one or their own death. The chaplain may try to enable the bereaved to see that dying is part of life. One is not cheated by being cut off from earthly living. He is favored in entering life eternal.

B. Planning for immediate necessary action.

The military person will need advice and help in planning for immediate necessary actions. He will have to notify others of the family who need to know of the death. A funeral director will have to be contacted. Financial situations will have to be arranged. Decision will have to be made concerning where the deceased is to be buried. While the bereaved will be aided by other military people especially involved in these various aspects, the chaplain plays an important part in aiding the bereaved to make these decisions in a wise and timely manner.

C. Assisting in directing attention from themselves.

The sorrowing must have their attention directed away from themselves; but their loss ought never to be minimized. A service family stood shocked beside the still form of their father. So recently he had traveled from California to Massachusetts to see his son and grandchildren. That which had been a happy reunion had turned into an abrupt and sorrowful parting. The young doctor, who had capably attended the father, reentered the room. Feeling that silence could be improved upon, he shrugged his shoulders and tersely said, "Well, that is just the way life is."

Fake consolations, too, must be avoided. Shakespeare allowed the uncle to say nearly everything that should not be said to Hamlet.

'...your father lost a father;
That father lost, lost his;...'tis as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense...
Why take it to heart...
To reason most absurd...who still hath cried.
From the first corpse till he that died today.
'Th's must be!'...To persevere

In obstinate condolment...
Shows a will most incorrect to Heaven;
A heart unfortified,² a mind impatient;
'Tis unmanly grief."²

To shrug one's shoulders or to pass over it as the uncle did is deliberate falsehood. One's attention is directed away from one's self by pointing to something beyond,--to someone beyond.

D. Looking forward to living.

The chaplain must still enable the person to somehow look ahead. The chaplain ought to be a teacher of the courage for living. People can be aided in the creative handling of their feelings. The bereaved will be better able to face the future, if he meets others who have had similar experiences. He should become active in various affairs which will convince him that he still is capable of productive work. He ought to have courage produced by an inner faith that is able to look ahead and value life for itself.

It is important that the bereaved become related again. In the parable of the lost coin,³ there was a functional loss when the coin was removed from circulation; and its function was not restored until the coin was found and made available for its purpose. The coin was lost by accident, but it was restored with intent. Often the loss of life and bereavement tends to take the mourner out of circulation, not so much by design as by accident. The chaplain can assist the person removed from life by bereavement to find his former useful place. Re-defined goals may create life anew and the bereaved may assume a function which he might otherwise have completely missed.

2. Hamlet, Act I, Scene 2

3. St. Luke 15:5-10

B. Letters of condolence.

One of the practices of the military, which commonly falls to the chaplain, is the composing of letters of condolence. This will be accomplished within 24 hours after the initial notification of death. This letter will contain the condolence of the writer, cause, circumstances and place of death. It will also include information concerning any religious services administered to the individual before death, memorial services conducted, and other information of a personal or sentimental nature which may be of comfort to the addressee.

"A letter of this type is a very delicate and difficult one for the commander or chaplain to write and for the bereaved family to receive. Therefore, special attention should be given to furnishing a simple logical explanation of events leading to the death. Sympathy should be expressed in a sincere manner and the use of meaningless words and stilted phrases avoided. Prompt and well-written letters containing all the circumstances may serve to offset adverse publicity in connection with death."⁴

In writing such letters, the proper purpose is not so much to honor the dead as it is to help the living. The aim ought to be to recall past joys and pride and certainly not to heap coals on the fire of sorrow.

III. The Military Chaplain Administers Religious Help.

Religion is not a pious outlook on life and a philosophy which largely withdraws a person from his fellows. Religion ought to have a practical aspect. It helps in the proper orientation of life. It does not deny, but rather fulfills the long struggle of man to know his nature and realize his possibilities. Religion does not limit the mode of man's life but lifts his limits by making the ultimates of life obtainable within the soul of the person. The accidents of life involving deprivation, sorrow and grief are not the ultimates of life, but are rather incidental to the larger meaning and purpose of existence. Religion ought to be a pattern of thought and a way of life that leads man toward the larger reality.

A. Help for the dying.

To point out in detail the services that individual chaplains can render persons of different faiths is beyond the scope of this paper. Many of the ministrations will have a common note, however. Some of these aspects are as follows.

1. Prayers for the dying.

Regardless of the faith which a person has espoused, he usually believes in prayer. The chaplain will do everything within his ability to aid the dying in formulating a prayer. The chaplain will not be reticent in seeking God's mercy for the dying through his own intercessory prayers.

Such prayers ought to express confidence in God, thanks for past mercy, and trust for the future. They ought to voice requests for

strength even in pain, for courage in shadows of despair. They ought to involve aid for those who he can no longer assist.

2. Questions concerning immortality.

The person faced with death will often have unanswered questions concerning his relationship to God. He will need help in finding answers to his soul's deepest needs. Here the chaplain will be God's special emissary as he assists the dying with answers, which will have an eternal aspect.

The hope and trust of immortality lives large in the expectations of every person. As death faces the individual, however, he will need reassurance about life beyond. The joy of the chaplain in aiding such a questioner becomes a golden opportunity. Assurances from the Scriptures and information from the faith, which the person claims, will fortify and enable him in preparation for death and eternal hope for hereafter.

3. Rites for the dying.

Baptism and anointing are rites which clergymen will be called upon to perform, either at the request of the dying or in keeping with the dictates of his faith. Circumstances of death will vary from the bleakness of a battle field to the cleanliness of the finest hospital room. In whatever place and in whatever manner possible, the chaplain will serve his God by serving God's people.

B. Help for the living.

If the chaplain in his dealings with those who face the problems of life and death can somehow create a consciousness of the underlying

goodness of life, the fear and resentment of death will be largely gone. If he can sustain a faith that has the courage of great ventures into the world of values, the gates of death may be friendly portals. Then he can pray and teach the prayer;

"O God, give me the serenity
To accept what cannot be changed.
Give me the courage
To change what can be changed,
And the wisdom to distinguish
The one from the other."⁵

1. Revolt against death.

When death comes to a loved one, the dilemma of continuing to live is met in various ways by the sorrowing. Strong, even hateful emotions are felt by some. Unable to accept the reality of their loss, they will cry out against the world and the people in it,--against God and His dealings with man.

O Death, here is thy sting!
Mortal wound in my heart I bear.
My love is from me apart,
And now gone. Cold, dark, empty, swirl of grief
Shrouds my sight, my reason, my faith.
Trappings unfit to be part of life,
Remove my spirit. They turn to swill
My inner parts. Gripping drug lays still
My ambition,--twarts my goals,--steals my will.
Bottomless pit, how far can I fall?
Is there no bottom,--no footing left,--only abyss?
O Death, here is thy sting!

O Grave, here is thy victory!
I see thee now! Gapping hole snatching
From me the one I held in fond embrace.
The form in which heart beat cadence with mine
Now lies cold,--earth stolen treasure.

5. Edgar N. Jackson. Understanding Grief. NY, Abingdon Press, 1957, pp 236,237.

Life's fullest bloom is so early blighted.
 Reason for living now beckons me for dying.
 To buy back from thee, my own, O Grave,
 I know not how. You glutton! You thief!
 You harbinger of hell! You despised claimant!
 I hate thee,--I loath thee, O Grave.
 O Grave, here is thy victor!

Such a person my continue to vent his wrath for an extended period of time. This sometimes persists to the extent that abnormal grief reactions become a block to any future normal relation to society.

The chaplain ought not to forsake his ministry in extending every effort to aid such deeply bereaved people. The sorrowing person will often be greatly helped if he can talk his emotion out. Drugs and dulled senses may have produced unreal and misleading ideas during and after the death. If the chaplain can enable the sorrowing to talk through his feelings and express his deepest doubts and questions, he may be well on the way back. His kindness and understanding may well and soon enable the grieving to adopt a healthy outlook on life again.

2. Acceptance of death.

The majority of people will accept death. Their need of spiritual help will challenge the chaplain, too. No particular ritual, prayer or visit will meet the needs of everyone, but the presence of God's representative with a family in crisis may sometimes lend stability and direction. So chaplains of the various faiths will be individually directed by their faith and the person to be ministered unto.

Religious faith plays such an important role in proper realignment of life after the decease of a loved one. Such faith may be evident in various ways. The manner in which the bereaved looks back, the way he

looks to the future, the plans for accomplishing life's goals, and the things he says are marked by his integration of religious conviction into continued living.

It needs to be pointed out that faith in God will not erase sorrow in the heart. To work through the grief the faithful person may well activate areas of practical Christian endeavor to fill the void in his life. Attendance of special study groups, sharing experiences with others and welfare work may be a few of the areas of help.

O Death, where is thy sting?

In spoiling flesh thou hast sparked eternity.
Stronger claim than living has called from me
The love, which lighted day's dullest moments.
Lonesome I shall be; yet, the sting of death
Is divinely parried. Absent from the body,
Present with the Lord. Heavenly promise
Turning my selfishness into the joy of sharing.
I share my love with Thee, O God,
To ask it differently is beyond my wish.
'And the mortal shall put on immortality.'
O Death, where is thy sting?

O Grave, where is thy victory?

To breathe earth's last is to enter heaven's first.
The eternal "why?" I cease to ask. I yield to faith.
Where I can not see, may I be led.
O Grave, your's is an empty victory.
My love abides not with thee,
But yonder where all wrongs are right,
Where all darkness light, where all sorrows joy.
There my own now peaceful dwells.
With bated heart and sight beyond my eyes,
I wait, too, and know the trump shall sound!
O Grave, where is thy sting?

The sorrowing, even though he has accepted the death of his loved one, may need continuing aid. The chaplain cannot daily, nor even often, call on such a person over an extended period of time. Time and circumstances will dictate when he may aid the bereaved, however.

IV. The Military Chaplain Conducts the Funeral.

A. Knowledge of circumstances of death.

At times the military chaplain will be called upon to conduct funeral services for persons unknown to him. The professional relationship with the funeral director will assist greatly at such times. When thrust into such circumstances, the chaplain might well ask the funeral director, "Is there anything unusual about this situation that you think I should know?" The funeral director can be a real ally in the work of ministering to the mourning.

B. Special military rituals.

Procedures, formations and complete information regarding the military aspects of a funeral are found in Conduct of a Military Funeral, Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 21-20.

The special rituals of a military funeral have distinct and honorable meanings. The caisson is symbolic of the last lonely ride; the firing of the volley illustrates the energy that is spent and gone; and the playing of taps marks the ending of the day of life. The military does not encourage emotional displays, but each part of the military service urges the facing of reality.

C. The funeral, a testimony of faith.

The funeral should be an evidence of faith. Even if people profess to have no faith, they should be aware of its presence in the representative of the church. It is well to use a portion of the funeral service to make a simple, direct affirmation of faith that is geared to the distressing points in life. It might be introduced by;

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"Our Christian faith is made for times such as this. It appeals to our most acute personal needs with a vision that has been built upon the experiences of untold generations who met the tribulations of life and became 'more than conquerors'."⁶

D. Evaluation of a funeral.

There are several ways in which a funeral may be evaluated.

The following criteria will be helpful to the military chaplain.

1. The funeral must deal with death realistically.
2. The funeral must present a vision of God which will be a comfort and help to the mourners in their suffering.
3. The funeral must see man as an individual of worth, turning man's attention to the importance of his personal integration and the resources which God offers for the strengthening and stabilizing of the self.
4. The funeral must demonstrate that the Christian faith is a source which enables the individual to mourn, rather than a substitute for mourning.
5. The funeral must recognize and accept deep feelings.
6. The funeral must provide a sense of finality.
7. The funeral must be an aid in recalling memories of the deceased.
8. The funeral is to establish a climate for mourning.
9. The funeral must be sensitive to the individual needs of the bereaved, dynamic, variable in both form and content."⁷

6. J.D. Morrison, Ministers Service Book, Chicago, Willett, Clark Co., p 187.
7. Paul Irion, The Funeral and the Mourner, N.Y. Abingdon Press, 1954, pp 86-87.

Conclusion:

The limits of this paper must exclude further examples and information on the various aspects of grief situations. The chaplain can readily see, however, that the task of comforting and aiding the bereaved is not small. The chaplain will be of great assistance to many. His conscience and the requirements of his church and the God he serves will guide him in his endeavors. He can do much good, but it is equally important for him to know when he can do no more good. In spite of his best intentions and ambitions, he cannot meet all the needs of all the people. Inability to assist all ought not to be thought of in terms of personal failure. In rightly evaluating his role on the team of healers in the military, the chaplain will understand that it will be necessary for him to refer many people to others on this team. The doctor, the psychiatrist, and the legal advisor stand ready to help people help themselves.

May God enable every military chaplain, as he ministers to people in grief situations, to "do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you" with wisdom, love and understanding.

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